

AMBROSE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

PT645: SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Gordon T. Smith, Ph.D.  
Coquitlam Alliance Church Theological Week-end  
September, 2007  
3 credit hours

Class Schedule

Thursday, September 27, 6 - 9 p.m.  
Friday, September 28, 6 - 9 p.m.  
Saturday, September 29, 9 - 4:30 p.m.  
Sunday, September 30, 2 - 4:30 p.m.

Course Description and Objectives

This course is an introduction to the art of spiritual discernment, which will enable students to recognize and respond to the prompting or inner witness of the Spirit. The professor will provide an overview of how discernment has been understood and practiced in the history of the church, with particular reference to the "Rules of Discernment" of Ignatius Loyola. The course will also provide a model for effective decision-making that will incorporate the wisdom of the Christian heritage. The primary focus will be upon seeking the wisdom and direction of God for critical choices and decisions.

*Objectives:* It is the intent of the professor that each student:

- 1) Understand the nature of divine guidance and appreciate more fully the manner in which God directs his people, and develop a biblical and historical understanding of guidance and discernment;
- 2) Appreciate his/her Christian heritage and the insights and contributions of the spiritual masters to the subject of discernment;
- 3) Appropriate a model for effective decision-making that reflects an encounter with God and a response to the wisdom and direction of God;
- 4) Be able to effectively respond to some of the obstacles and blocks to discernment in their own life

Lecture Outline

Part I THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

1. Theology, Spirituality and the Question of Religious Experience

2. Faith Development and Spiritual Discernment
3. Discernment: The Church's Historic Witness
4. Biblical and Theological Foundations for Discernment

## Part II THE PRACTICE OF DISCERNMENT

5. Ignatius Loyola and the Rules for Discernment
6. A Three-fold intentional model for Effective Decision-Making
8. Discernment and Vocation: Career Choices and Divine Guidance
9. Prayer and Discernment
10. Discernment and Community.

*Assignments (Note: Assignments No 1 , 2 and 4 are due one month following the conclusion of the theological week-end: October 31, 2007; assignment No. 3 is due on November 30, 2007)*

### **1. Reading Notes**

Read the assigned textbooks and provide an 8 page submission of notes from this reading. For each chapter, identify (1) a key learning; and (2) a question or problem that has arisen in the student's mind from the reading. Note: this is not a book review; and the submission can be in bullet form.

### **2. Small Group Discussion and Notes.**

Each student will be assigned to a small group for discussion throughout the course – a group of three (at the most, four) students.

The assignment will have three components:

- (1) Reading of assigned essays: notes from reading submitted.
- (2) Group discussion of those readings.
- (3) Notes from the reading submitted.

Small group assignments will be made during the in class sessions; students will meet in small groups at another time apart from the actual theological week-end.

### **3. Reflective Essay**

Provide an anatomy of a decision made or in the process of being made.

This should be developed in response to the lectures, discussions and readings for this course. This could be written in the first, second or third person, but it should describe an actual decision made or in the process of being made. It could be a decision poorly made wherein the essay describes why it was poorly made, or it could describe the process of decision being made now and the circumstances surrounding this decision. It could be a

choice you are making or one you are advising another to make. The essay could be in the form of a letter to someone, helping him or her see the nature of his or her decision.

Your essay should reveal your ability to understand the nature of effective discernment and good decision-making, and give evidence of understanding the process of decision-making outlined in the lectures. In effect, this is the final examination for this course. Length: 18 pages, 3500 wds (no less than 14 pages, and no more than 25 pages).

#### **4. Additional Assignment.**

In addition, each student will have personally designed assignment, reflecting their personal situation or circumstances. Possible assignments include:

4.1. Write an essay on the science of corporate discernment, with particular application to congregational life – how congregations can together respond to the leadership of Christ; this essay will be written out of critical reflection of key current publications on the theme of corporate discernment (see the concluding chapters of *The Voice of Jesus*, along with other sources listed in the bibliography);

4.2. Take a day of recollection/prayer and apply the principles of discernment to a personal decision; the assignment would require that the student submit a critical reflection on the practice of a “day of prayer.” For this assignment the student would need to be able to demonstrate appreciation of the historic principles that guide the spiritual retreat, notably those of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola.

4.3. Take three of four of the sources in the bibliography and write a review essay of the current debate on discernment and decision-making; this should be a reading of at least 320 pages from the books listed. If the student chooses this option, the books should be selected in consultation with the course instructor.

#### Evaluation

Reading Notes:	20%
Small Group Discussion	20%
Reflective Essay: anatomy of a decision	40%
Additional Assignment	20%

#### Bibliography

***Required Texts & Readings:***

Green, Thomas H. *Weeds Among the Wheat*. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1984).

Smith, Gordon T. *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2003).

***Suggested Readings:***

*The Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius Loyola (a recent translation). Photocopies of the Rules for Discernment, from the Exercises will be provided for each student (Puhl edition).

Smith, Gordon T. *Listening to God in Times of Choice* (Downers Grove, IVP Press, 1997).

Smith, Gordon T. *Alone with the Lord: a Guide to A Personal Day of Prayer* (Regent, 2002)

***Additional Readings***

Aschenbrenner, George A. A Consciousness Examen, @ *Review for Religious*, 31, 1971/1.

Barnes, Ronald. "Dreams in Spiritual Direction: Help or Distraction?" *The Christian Ministry of Spiritual Direction*, ed by Fleming, David L., .pp. 381-399.

Barry, William A. *Paying Attention to God*.

Barry, William A. & William J. Connolly. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*.

Bockmuehl, Klaus. *Listening to the God Who Speaks*

Carmody, John. *Reexamining Conscience*

Dubay, Thomas. *Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment*

Dunne, Tad. *Spiritual Mentoring: Guiding People through Spiritual Exercises to Life Decisions*.

Edwards, Jonathan. *Religious Affections*.

English, John. *Choosing Life: Significance of Personal History in Decision-Making*.

English, John J. *Spiritual Freedom*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

- Friessen, Garry. *Decision-Making and the Will of God*
- Green, Thomas H. *Darkness in the Marketplace.*
- Green, Thomas H. *Weeds Among the Wheat.*
- Guillet, Jacques, et. al. *Discernment of Spirits.*
- Howard, Evan B. *Affirming the Touch of God: A Psychological and Philosophical Exploration of Christian Discernment.*
- Ignatius Loyola. *Spiritual Exercises* (translations of Puhl and Corbishley recommended).
- Johnson, Ben Campbell. *Discerning God's Will.*
- Larkin, Ernest E. *Silent Presence: Discernment as Process and Problem.*
- Louf, Andre. *Teach us to Pray*
- Merton, Thomas. *Spiritual Direction and Meditation.*
- O'Sullivan, Michael J. "Trust Your Feelings; Use your Head" *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 22/4, Sept. 1990.
- Palmer, Parker. "The Clearance Committee," *Weavings* III, 4, July/Aug, 1988, 37-40.
- Rahner, Karl. *The Dynamic Element in the Church*
- Ramm, Bernard. *The Witness of the Spirit.*
- Spohn, William C. "Finding God in All Things: Jonathan Edwards and Ignatius Loyola," @ *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, S.J.*, ed. By Michael J. Himes and Stephen J. Pope (New York: Crossroad, 1996), pp. 244-261.
- Toner, Jules J. *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.*
- The Way Supplement 64*: "The Place of Discernment" Spring, 1989  
 Articles that are particularly helpful in this issue of *The Way Supplement* are:  
 Yeomans, William. "The Refugee Experience", pp. 3-9.  
 Ward, Benedicta. "Discernment: A Rare Bird," pp. 10-18.  
 Goldsbury, Margaret. "Diminishing God's Handiwork: Blocks to Discernment", pp. 80-87.  
 Barry, William A. "Toward a Theology of Discernment," pp. 129-140.

Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Prayer*.

Wesley, John, *The Witness of the Spirit*, @ *Works*, vol. 5, Kansas City, Nazarene, 1872 reprod., p. 111.

Willard, Dallas. *In Search of Guidance*.

Wolff, Pierre. *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*

### **Communal Discernment**

Cooper, Roswitha, ed. *Finding God's Will in Community: The Process of Communal Discernment*, *Progressio*, Supplement No. 40, July, 1993.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*. Abingdon Press, 1983, 1996. (Methodist).

Morris, Danny E. and Charles M. Olsen. *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church*.

Olson, Chuck and Ellen Morseth. *Selecting Church Leaders: A Practice in Spiritual Discernment* (Alban, 2002).

Orsy, Ladislav. *Probing the Spirit: A Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment*.

Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*.